

Case Study: An Eschatological Community

A Congregation's Challenge of "Living Between the Ages"

In 1985, our two-year old congregation, Grace Fellowship Community Church, at last completed and published its "position paper," a document that theologically articulated our vision as a new, denominational (Cumberland Presbyterian) work in San Francisco. A cornerstone of the vision was clearly eschatological in nature, as this excerpt demonstrates:

*"We live **between the ages**, in anticipation of the day when the King of Heaven, God Himself, is revealed in glory, and the justice of the Lord will finally triumph. Yet we do not wait idly, for to hope in such a thing does not mean we cease to care for the needs of the world. To care for these needs, to give ourselves to this task, is the very point of our hope. It means that we will always be a people who pray, "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven."'¹ (Note: Bolded phrase, "between the ages," preserved from original document).*

For us, coming out of a Chinatown-based, conservative evangelical church, this idea of living corporately like a tree with "roots in the future, and branches in the present" (author unknown) was a radical and compelling notion. At the time, the American ecclesial landscape was comprised largely of two camps: (1) those that believed that "the earth is going down "hell in a handbasket" and, therefore, we focus on saving souls (e.g. *Evangelism Explosion* was all the rage) through tireless evangelism, or (2) those who believed that the Church's task was to usher

¹ Bob Appleby & Sharon Huey, *Position Paper*, (San Francisco: Grace Fellowship Community Church, 1985)

in the Kingdom by transforming society through tireless activism. For a tired lot, the prospect of a “third way” held significant attraction.

However, holding in tension the truth that “the Lord will triumph” with “not idly standing by” is much easier to conceptualize than to live out. As eschatology professor Suzanne McDonald points out, “each one of us is going to have a tendency, a preference, for one of these two things over the other.”² For our congregation, I would argue that we collectively possessed a predominant bias toward the former. A corollary conviction to a “triumphant Lord” became a congregational mantra: “It’s not about us.” The conditioned, almost reflexive, affirmation that the Christian life is “not about us,” combined with an aversion to what we considered a near-ungodly “busy work” of our congregational past, predisposed us toward inaction.

Cultural differences, as well as some unhealthy power dynamics, between pastoral leadership and the congregation at large, also played a role: members of the church family feared “standing out,” lest they be judged as being “heroic,” a “problem solver,” or a run-of-the-mill San Francisco liberal activist. Keeping a low profile wasn’t difficult for a predominantly Chinese people, with its Confucianist emphasis on (often false) modesty, and an associated veneration of the group over the individual. Led by an authoritarian-style, white-male leader, it was much easier to keep one’s head down, stay within the lines (i.e. “Just tell me what to do”).

This is not to say that we didn’t do anything. On the contrary, we engaged in a variety of ministries, serving the community and advocating (mainly through occasional letter-writing) for important matters such as hunger relief or debt-relief. But we tended toward ministry that was measured, manageable (i.e. that fit within our schedules), and risk-averse...much of which I formed and led. Our preponderant concern about “not making ministry about us,” has, and can, come at the expense of a more robust, freer, surprise-filled, and joyous engagement in God’s

² Suzanne McDonald, *Scriptural Contours*, lecture, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI, 2017.

work of shalom in His redemption-bound world. What particular eschatological truths might be brought to bear for our congregation, toward such renewed engagement?

In *The Bible and the Future*, Anthony Hoekema insists on the importance of personal sanctification, and the role of the Holy Spirit, for the journey toward the eschaton. As he puts it, “faith in the continuing transformation being worked in us...should spur us on in our endeavors.”³ He enunciates this point with the fact that “the Christian life is marked by spiritual growth”⁴ and that we, “therefore should look upon himself as a new person in Christ who is being progressively renewed by the Spirit of God.”⁵ This is significant, in that there is a danger of losing sight of this when our fear of being self-focused ends up precluding personal discipleship. For Hoekema, our participation in the redemption of creation (including works of mercy and justice) is something we should *expect* if the Spirit is at work in disciples.

Another critical theme that Hoekema presses is that of the *continuity* between the present and the future, drawing on several New Testament passages (e.g. the works we do that may or may not survive God’s judgement in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15) to validate this thesis. He reminds us that “the new earth to which we look forward will not be totally different from the present one, but will be a renewal and glorification of the earth on which we now live.”⁶ However, as McDonald observes, it is difficult to imagine such glorification, to “keep hold of the *already* side [because] we see so much of the *not yet*, so much of the groaning because of injustice.” This is particularly true of a parish like ours, ensconced in the ultra-progressive context of San Francisco, perhaps the most cynical and distrusting of all urban-American communities. Therefore, it behooves our congregation to practice looking past, or through, the glaring brokenness with the hope of the eschatological reality that is ours.

³ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 71.

⁴ Ibid, p. 72.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, p.73.

In *Surprised by Hope*, N.T. Wright directly connects Christ's bodily resurrection to the Church's missional engagement in the present. Like Hoekema, he refers to the Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, one of the bible's most important texts on resurrection theology, for insight: "Therefore, since you have such a great hope...be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58)." Wright encapsulates the message of this text this way: "What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future for it."⁷ To be sure, our congregation lives with bodily awareness, but it tends to range, at best, from self-denial ("We don't want to idolize our physiques") to godly self-care ("We need to help our bodies last for Christian service"). Locating our bodies within an eschatological frame helps us see the whole of the physical, material world (and the exploitation, inequitable distribution, and beauty associated with it) with more vigorous potential.

Lastly, in *Liberating Eschatology*, Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz also assumes the continuity between the ages, that is, *history*, which provides the necessary foundation for her *prophetic* eschatology. She argues that while the solutions to injustice that history provide are context-specific and, therefore, limited in value, "the vision that guides the solutions offered in prophetic eschatology can indeed be of use to us today,"⁸ which she explains as an inextricable relationship between justice (righteousness) and peace, which together constitutes *shalom*. She stresses the centrality of repentance, in biblical history, for the overcoming of crises, because of the reality of human responsibility, for better or worse, in the human community. Repentance, which is active and reparative, is our part and the only thing we *can* do, given our inability to know or influence God's role in history. Thus, in Latina *mujerista* theology, such perspective leads to

⁷ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), p. 193.

⁸ Margaret A. Farley & Serene Jones, *Liberating Eschatology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p.228.

concentration on “using our temporal life span to create a just and good community for our generation and our children.⁹”

This relationship between an eschatological vision of shalom, and real stories and real lives of struggle and oppression, is an elusive one for those (of us) who operate fundamentally out of positions of strength. We, as a congregation, may arrived at the ability to articulate a shalomic, theo-political vision, largely because we have the time and resources to do so, but there can (and largely does) remain a disconnect between what we know and how we live. For this reason, we must pay heed to Isasi-Díaz’ insistence upon the importance of story, namely, that we must lean into the stories of Latinas (and other under-heard communities) to more deeply grasp the implications of the eschaton, God’s good future, for our world.

By the grace of God, the congregation of Grace Fellowship Community Church has been given this very opportunity as, particularly over the past decade, a growing number of Latino families (primarily led by single moms) have become a part of our congregation. Remarkably, they have found a family in us, and they bring with them stories of suffering, persecution, and faithfulness in God, that foreign (literally) to the college-educated, middle class experience that the majority of us possess. Whether we do receive the gift of their stories more fully remains to be seen. It behooves us to do so, lest our rich eschatology remains sterile, our missional imaginations, and prophetic embodiment, limited.

⁹ Ibid, p.229.